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Between hope and fear? Regional and social dividing lines in attitudes towards an EU minimum income scheme

Roosma F., Oorschot W. Between hope and fear? Regional and social dividing lines in attitudes towards an EU minimum income scheme

Previous studies have suggested that Europeans' support for introducing an EU minimum-income scheme would be determined by a hope-or-fear reasoning. Where Northern/Western Europeans may fear that their generous benefits are levelled out, Southern/Eastern Europeans may be critical of their country's welfare policies and therefore have hopes for a higher level of benefits and services coming from Europe. We tested this expected mediation effect in 18 EU member states. Results show that both performance evaluation of social benefits and expectations about EU interference predict support for an EU minimum-income scheme, following expected regional dividing lines. However, against theoretical expectations, there has been no substantial mediation effect. Where support for an EU minimum income scheme is based mostly on social dividing lines, expectations of the EU are related more to contextual differences. Citizens from countries that are net-receivers of the EU have higher hopes that EU interference will lead to higher benefits and services.

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In the process of European integration, social policy has been, and still is, a contested issue. Thus far, there are no binding obligations for EU countries to adhere and contribute to social policy arrangements for the European people at the European level. There is of course the 'open method of coordination' in employment and social inclusion (Vandenbroucke, 2017), there are EU social policy regulations and directives (Graziano & Hartlapp, 2019), there is the coordination of cross-border mobility and transferable social rights, and there are strong social impacts from the European structural funds and the free movement of people, goods and services (Faist, 2014; Gerhards & Lengfeld, 2013; Geyer, 2000). Nevertheless, we are still far from a full 'Social Europe' in which social policies and social rights for European citizens are directly regulated at the European level (Martinsen & Vollaard, 2014). Empirical evidence shows even that there is a 'fatigue of social policy advancement' at the EU level (Graziano & Hartlapp, 2019, p. 1498). Historically, the development of European social policies and the inherent trans-national redistribution and solidarity that they would imply have proven not to be politically feasible. A main reason seems to be that there is too much diversity in Europe, in an institutional, socio-economic and cultural sense (Banchoff & Smith, 1999; Ferrera, 2005; Habermas, 2013). This makes it difficult, as suggested by Scharpf (2002), to reach an agreement on the types and levels of European social protection that are needed, as well as on who should benefit from it and who should contribute.

Although there is a rather extended literature about popular attitudes in favour or against the EU or European integration as an economic, political and social process (e.g., Anderson & Kaltenhaler, 1996; Gaxie, Hubé, & Rowell, 2011; Leruth, Startin, & Usherwood, 2018; Marks & Steenbergen, 2004; McLaren, 2006), support for the social policy role of the EU has been addressed in only a few public opinion studies thus far (Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Beaudonnet, 2014; Gerhards, Lengfeld, & Häuberer, 2016; Lengfeld, Schmidt, & Häuberer, 2015; Mau, 2005). Especially the study of Baute and Meuleman (2020) has advanced our knowledge of both the individual and contextual characteristics that determine support for an EU minimum-income scheme. They found that people's expectations of the EU, of the welfare generosity of their own welfare state and their evaluation of their own welfare state's performance influence support for an EU social policy intervention. The study also showed that lower social economic status groups are more in favour of an EU minimum-income scheme (Baute & Meuleman, 2020).

In the present study, we aimed to further explore why people support the EU's involvement in the social policy domain. What underlying mechanism can explain support for an EU minimum-income scheme? We focused on a specific theoretical explanation advocated, but not yet evidenced, in previous studies that suggests that support for developing EU social policies would be determined by a *hope-or-fear reasoning* that differs for European regions (Beaudonnet, 2013; Burgoon, 2009; Mau, 2005; Ray, 2004). Where Northern/Western Europeans may fear that the standards of their generous benefits are levelled out by EU social policies, Southern/Eastern Europeans may be critical of their country's welfare policies and therefore hope for higher level benefits and services coming from, or via, Europe. The reasoning suggests that positive/negative performance *evaluations* of social benefits in one's own country lead to the *expectation* that an EU-level social policy regulation would improve/worsen social benefits in a country and in this way determine people's *support* for EU social policy. As said, this theoretical suggestion has not yet been empirically tested. Baute and Meuleman (2020) found an effect of welfare performance evaluation and of expectations of the EU on support for an EU minimum-income scheme, but whether or not the effect of performance evaluation on support for an EU minimum-income scheme is *mediated* by expectations of the EU, as the hope-or-fear reasoning suggests, was not examined.

With data from the repeat module on Welfare Attitudes in the newest European Social Survey (ESS 2016, wave 8), we were able to test the hope-or-fear reasoning directly. The survey contains a measure of support for a far-reaching aspect of the EU social policy domain, namely an EU social regulation in the domain of minimum income protection. For this reason, in this study, we tested support for an EU minimum-income scheme, as a specific proposal for EU interference in the social policy domain.

In this study, we sought to answer the following research questions: (i) What are European people's *evaluations* of the performance of welfare provision in their country; what are their *expectations* regarding the EU influence on their country's welfare provision; and how strong is *support* for the possible implementation of an EU-wide minimum income protection scheme? (ii) Can this support be explained by 'the hope-or-fear reasoning', that is, is a relationship between critical evaluations of the welfare state and support for a EU social benefit *mediated* by people's expectations that an EU-level social policy regulation would improve (hope) or worsen (fear) social benefits in their country? Additionally, we took into account and controlled for (other) individual- and contextual-level factors in explaining *expectations* of the EU in providing social benefits and *support* for an EU-wide minimum income scheme.

With this article, we contribute to understanding European people's support for EU social policy, its national differences across the EU and their social determinants. We first review existing empirical studies in the field, thereby developing our analytical focus in more detail. In a next step, we discuss our data and analytical strategy. Then, we present our results and end with conclusions and a discussion.

Between hope and fear, in support for EU social policy

Support for EU intervention in the social policy domain

As Baute, Meuleman, Abts and Swyngedouw (2018) argued, the EU influence in the social policy domain can express itself in various ways. Generally, people think it is a good idea that EU residents can carry their social benefits to other EU countries (Berg, 2007; Gerhard & Lengfeld, 2015). As argued by Gerhards and Lengfeld (2013), equality for EU-foreigners within the boundaries of each member state is still very different from a truly trans-national EU solidarity, for example in the form of a shared European system of social protection, yet, people seem supportive towards introducing a uniform welfare system and thus, the harmonisation of national welfare states. But it must be noted that support differs: In more encompassing welfare states, people are less supportive (Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Gerhards et al., 2016). Other opinion studies show that people are much more reserved in their support for EU influence in the social policy domain. From Eurobarometer data, we know that in general the majorities of the citizenry of the Northern, Western and Mediterranean EU countries oppose the EU taking binding decisions on health and welfare policies (Mau, 2005). And re-distribution via structural funds (Beaudonnet, 2014; Lengfeld et al., 2015) is not a popular way of organising European solidarity. Proposals for establishing EU benefit schemes for EU citizens can be found in various policy proposals in the literature; see, for example, Dullien (2013) on an EU unemployment insurance schemes, Levy, Matsaganis, and Sutherland (2013) on an EU child benefit, Atkinson (2005, 2015) with his pioneering work on a EU-wide child basic income and Peña-Casas and Bouget (2014) on an EU minimum income benefit. Baute et al. (2018) regard this as the 'most intrusive' form of cross-national EU solidarity, meaning that such schemes may be most directly experienced by EU citizens in terms of personal costs and revenues. To our knowledge, support for the concrete policy proposal for an EU minimum-income scheme has been studied only by Baute and Meuleman (2020). They found high but differing support for such a scheme, conditional on the context of the national welfare state's generosity.

Also other studies have found considerable differences among the European countries: EU influence

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in the social policy domain is less popular in the more developed welfare states compared with countries with lower levels and coverage of social provisions (Gerhards et al., 2016). For instance, people in the Scandinavian countries more strongly oppose European shared decision-making in social policies than do people in Continental countries, while the Mediterranean people are comparatively stronger supporters (Beaudonnet, 2013; Mau, 2005). And in European countries with more generous welfare, there is less individual support for the EU giving priority to the fight against poverty and social exclusion (Burgoon, 2009).

Does hope-or-fear reasoning explain EU social policy support?

Several scholars give as an explanation that these differences in support for European social policies are rooted in the performance evaluations of people's own welfare states (Beaudonnet, 2013; Burgoon, 2009; Gerhards et al., 2016; Mau, 2005; Ray, 2004), where, for example, Scandinavian people may fear that the standards of their generous benefits and services will be levelled out in European social policies, whereas the Mediterranean and Eastern-European people are more critical about and therefore less attached to, their own welfare policies and may hope for something better. This kind of hope-or-fear reasoning offers interesting suggestions, because if true, it would inform us about the motivational basis for different expectations that underlie popular ideas about European social policies in different countries and regions of Europe.

Empirical studies have found both some evidence in favour and some against this claim. Analyses of data from the Welfare Attitudes module of the ESS 2008, wave 4, have shown first indications for the suggestion of country and regional differences in hope and fear regarding the outcomes of EU-regulated social policy, be it indirectly. That is, wherein people in Northern and Western welfare states are more overall positive about the role of the welfare state and its actual performance and outcome, in Southern and especially in Eastern European welfare states, people are mostly performance critical, meaning that although they support a strong role for the welfare state, they are critical about their own welfare state's performance (Roosma & van Oorschot, 2017). This could lead to the expectation that people in Eastern and Southern European countries could have higher expectations of the EU, as their national welfare state does not meet expectations. More specifically, Baute and Meuleman (2020) have presented evidence that welfare state generosity and higher perceived performance are negatively related to support for an EU minimum-income scheme. They also found a positive relation between expectations about the EU's impact on the support for this scheme. However, it is unclear if this expectation *mediates* the relation between perceived performance and EU social policy support.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of central variables..

If the hope-or-fear reasoning were true, we would find support for an EU minimum-income scheme to be higher if people expected it to result in an improvement of their social protection (hope), while support for an EU minimum-income scheme would be lower if people expected it to result in a deterioration of their social protection (fear). Additionally, it leads to the expectation that people's hopes/fears are greater when they are more/less critical about the performance of their own welfare system. Based on this reasoning, it can be expected that expectations of the EU and support for an EU minimum-income scheme are lower in the more encompassing welfare states of Europe, notably in the Northern and Western countries. The expectations regarding the hope-or-fear reasoning are shown in Figure 1.

Individual and contextual factors

To take into account possible confounding individual-level factors in the mediation effect of the hope-or-fear reasoning and to examine the underlying assumption of the hope-or-fear reasoning that regional dividing lines are driven by differences in economic situations, we discuss various individual and contextual factors that might explain differences in expectations of the EU and support for an EU minimum-income scheme.

In welfare attitudes research, it is generally assumed that attitudes are influenced by two types of characteristics: the degree to which people are in a vulnerable position and therefore may experience a direct self-interest in welfare provision; and their ideational position regarding welfare, indicated by relevant values and ideologies they adhere to (Jæger, 2006; Kangas, 1997; Linos & West, 2003). As for the role of self-interest, where 'normally' one could expect that people in more vulnerable social positions would be more in favour of welfare protection generally, it seems that in the case of EU-level social policy matters are not so straightforward. That is, following the

hope-or-fear logic, the effect of belonging to a lower socio-economic status group in society can differ quite a bit between the more or the less developed welfare states of Europe. While vulnerable people living in the less generous welfare states of Europe may have higher hopes for an improvement of their protection under a European scheme than do their compatriots who are better off, in the more generous welfare states of Europe the lower socio-economic status groups may actually be more fearful than their better-off fellow citizens. However, Gerhards et al. (2016) did not find evidence for clear socio-economic cleavages on support for an Europeanised social policy, also when differences between countries were taken into account. Country-level differences seem more important. Baute and Meuleman (2020) found a negative effect of socio-economic status on support for an EU minimum-income scheme; however, the explanatory power of this effect was small. We therefore controlled for factors that are usually recognised as indicating people's self-interest in welfare provision: subjective income, educational level, work status, gender and age (Ervasti, Goul Andersen, Fridberg, & Ringdal, 2012; Svallfors, 2012). Additionally, we considered the effects of ideational factors such as egalitarianism and political stance. Welfare support is usually higher among people who are (more) egalitarian and more left-wing (Ervasti et al., 2012; Svallfors, 2012). Both Gerhards et al. (2016) and Baute and Meuleman (2020) found some expected (but small) effects for political affiliation on support for an EU welfare system. Moreover, Baute, Meuleman and Abts (2019) and Baute and Meuleman (2020) found that people's opinions on EU social policy are also partly affected by their attitudes to Europe and Europeanisation as such. Verhaegen (2018) and Gerhards et al. (2016) showed similar findings for a selection of EU countries. We therefore controlled for the effect of affiliation with the EU.

Contextual-level characteristics could give us more insight into the reasons behind the regional differences that are assumed to underlie the hope-or-fear reasoning. Because our data set included only 18 country cases (of the 28 EU member states), it was not possible to assess the influence of multiple contextual factors simultaneously. We nevertheless wanted to get a somewhat deeper insight into these relations by analysing the role of country characteristics one by one. The literature suggests mainly that economic types of factors may play a role, first indicating a kind of 'national-interest' effect. Beaudonnet (2013) found that people living in countries that are net receivers of EU transfers are more supportive of EU-level decision-making on social policies than are people living in net contributing countries, while Burgoon (2009) found that support is higher in countries that receive more from structural funds. There may also be an effect of economic conditions in terms of 'problem awareness'. Burgoon (2009) found that people give higher priority to the EU fighting poverty and social exclusion in countries with a higher unemployment rate. Lastly, EU social policy may be conditioned by popular perceptions of a country's wealth. Where this is lower one could expect more support for EU social policy, since, as Baute et al. (2019) suggested, in the less wealthy countries of EU, fear for welfare cutbacks and retrenchments may be assumed to be higher.

Data and methods

Data

We used the European Social Survey 2016/2017 (round 8) that contains a broad welfare attitude module. There are 18 countries, from different regions, included in the survey that are EU member states (at the moment of survey) (N = 35,450 respondents): the Northern European countries Finland (FI) and Sweden (SE); the Western European countries Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Germany (DE), France (FR), Great Britain (GB), Ireland (IE) and The Netherlands (NL); the Eastern European countries the Czech Republic (CZ), Estonia (EE), Hungary (HU), Lithuania (LI), Poland (PL) and Slovenia (SI); the Southern European countries Spain (ES), Italy (IT) and Portugal (PT). For the country level variables, we obtained data from the OECD Productivity Statistics database and the OECD Unemployment Indicator[1] and from the EU Budget Financial report 2014 (European Union, 2015).

Central variables Three variables were central in our analysis: the dependent variable (Y) 'support for an EU minimum-income scheme'; a mediating variable (M) 'hope or fear regarding EU decisions about social benefits'; and a main independent variable (X) 'evaluations of the current social benefits in a country'.

Our data allowed for measuring people's support for an EU minimum-income scheme (Y) by means of the question whether people are in favour or against a European Union-wide minimum income benefit. This measure refers to a social policy that is characterised as the 'most intrusive' form of cross-national EU solidarity (Baute et al., 2018). The question in the ESS data is introduced with a specific definition of the policy proposal, which takes into account the fact that the (tax payers in the) richer member states pay more into such a scheme. Moreover, it is mentioned that the exact level of such scheme would differ for the different member

[1] https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/.

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states to take into account that the cost of living can differ substantially between EU states. The question reads as follows: 'A European Union-wide social benefit scheme includes all of the following: The purpose is to guarantee a minimum standard of living for all poor people in the European Union; The level of social benefit people receive will be adjusted to reflect the cost of living in their country; The scheme would require richer European Union countries to pay more into such a scheme than poorer European Union countries. Overall, would you be against or in favour of having such a European Union-wide social benefit scheme?' Answer categories include: strongly against (1), against (2), in favour (3), strongly in favour (4). We created a dummy variable distinguishing between those in favour (1) and those against (0) the proposed EU minimum-income scheme.

Our second variable (M) measured the expectations of the EU regarding social benefits and services specifically, and was phrased as follows: 'If more decisions were made by the European Union rather than by national governments, do you think the level of social benefits and services provided in [country] would become higher or lower?' Answer categories were based on a 5-point scale, recoded such that a higher score measured more 'hope' that the level of social benefits and services in a country would become (much) higher.

Lastly, our third item, the independent variable (X), measured people's perceived performance of their welfare state. In previous studies using the ESS 2008/2009 data, this concept was measured using a scale of six items, including an evaluation of the state of education, healthcare, affordable child care, the opportunity for young people to find a job, and perceived standard of living of elderly and unemployed people (Roosma & van Oorschot, 2017). For ESS 2016/2017 data, two of these six items were not available: The evaluation of child care and of the opportunity for young people to find a job were not included in the survey. As the remaining items did not form a strong scale (Cronbach's alpha of .65 overall, ranging from .47 (FR) to .69 (HU) for different countries), we focused on the item that most directly measured the evaluation of social benefits, as that is the closest to our measure of support for an EU minimum-income scheme: the perceived standard of living of the unemployed. We are aware that there is some discrepancy between the focus on the unemployed – generally referring to those relying on (insurance based) unemployment benefits – and the target group of the outcome variable, that is, people with an income below the poverty line. A limitation of the available data set is that it does not include a measure of the evaluation of the standard of living of the poor in a country. The chosen item was measured on an 11-point scale (0–10). A higher perceived standard of living indicates perception of a better performance.

The correlations between the different indicators were −0.18 between X and Y; .24 between M and Y; and −0.18 between X and M.

Control variables For socio-economic status, we used several measures. Subjective income was measured by asking people how they felt about their household income nowadays in four answer categories from 'living comfortably' to 'finding it very difficult on present income'. Education was measured in five categories (reducing the ISCED categories to five levels from primary education (1) to higher education (5)). Third, we used dummy items for work status (the item measured 'What have you been doing for the last seven days?'): paid work (reference), unemployed (both actively looking for a job and not actively looking for a job), retired, permanently sick or disabled, and other not in labour (community work, housework, other). Lastly, we used gender (reference: male) and age in years. For ideological affiliation, we chose the traditional left/right self-placement scale (11-point scale) in three dummy variables left (score 0–3, reference), middle (4–6), right (7–10). We used egalitarian values as a proxy for ideology ('For a fair society, differences in standard of living should be small.') on a 5-point scale. Pro EU attitude was indicated with a measure of how emotionally attached people are to the EU on an 11-point scale. All linear variables were standardised.

Country level variables Indicators for GDP per capita in purchasing power parities (ppp) (* 1,000) and unemployment rate of the working-age population (15–64) were measured in the year prior to the survey 2015 and obtained from the OECD Productivity Statistics database and the Unemployment Indicator. The operating budgetary balance of the EU member states was measured with 'the relationship between a member state's share of total allocated EU operating expenditure and its share of 'national contributions' as a percentage of GNI, and was obtained from the EU Budget Financial report for the year 2014 (European Union, 2015). A positive percentage indicates that a country is a net receiver, a negative percentage indicates that a country is a net payer. The correlation between GDP per capita in ppp and operating budgetary balance was 0.679, and correlations with unemployment rate and GDP per capita and unemployment rate and operating budgetary balance were −0.110 and −0.099, respectively. All variables were centred.

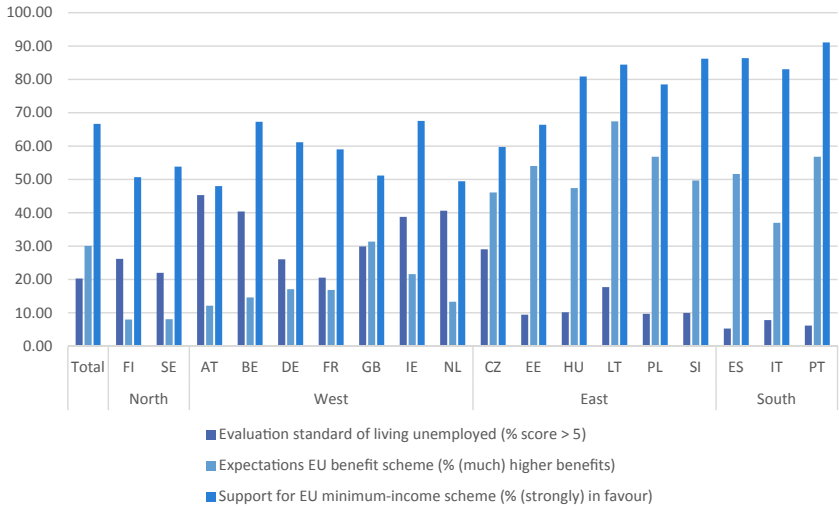

Figure 2. Descriptive statistics of three central variables in the hope-or-fear reasoning. *Note*: Design and population weights are applied according to ESS guidelines.

Methods

In the first step, we provided descriptive statistics of our three central variables of interest, answering our first research questions. In the next step, we performed a multilevel logistic regression analysis of the support for the EU minimum-income scheme variable and a multilevel regression analysis of the hope-or-fear variable, testing the influence of the individual-level and contextual-level variables that could provide better insight into the hope-or-fear reasoning. Each contextual factor was included in a separate model, to account for the low sample size at the macro level. To measure the explained level variance in the multilevel logistic regression models, we followed instructions from Snijders and Bosker (2012, pp. 305–307).[2]

Lastly, we analysed the mediation effect, answering our research question 2. We used the KHB package in Stata, developed by Karlson, Holm, and Breen (Breen, Karlson, & Holm, 2013; Kohler, Karlson, & Holm, 2011). The KHB method is able to recover the degree to which a mediating variable explains the relationship between X and Y, and it allows estimation of this effect for nonlinear probability models such as the logit model. A relevant feature of the KHB method is that it presents the coefficients on the same scale. For this reason, the magnitude of the log odds is hard to interpret. Therefore, after running the analysis, the confounding ratio and the confounding percentage can be calculated to interpret the magnitude of the indirect effect (Breen et al., 2013; Kohler et al., 2011). A Monte Carlo study comparing the KHB method with two other studies (Imai, Keele, & Tingley, 2010; Imai, Keele, & Yamamoto, 2010) showed that the studies performed equally well in recovering the true mediation percentage (Breen et al., 2013) and therefore the KHB model is also suitable for giving a causal interpretation of indirect effects. The KHB model also allows the inclusion of the individual-level control variables (concomitant variables). Because the package does not allow the estimate of a multilevel logistic regression model, we applied it to a fixed effects logistic regression model by including the country dummies as well.

Results

In Figure 2, we present the main statistics of our three central variables of interest (see the Appendix, Table A1 for the full statistics). It shows that, overall, there is high support for an EU minimum-income scheme: Two thirds of the respondents in the total sample indicated that they were in favour of a EU social benefit scheme that provides a minimum standard of living to all poor people in the EU, and in only two (AT and NL) of the 18 countries was such a scheme supported by less than half of the population (see also Baute & Meuleman, 2020). These results confirm the results from Gerhards et al. (2016) regarding support for an EU uniform welfare system, for a selection of European countries (Germany, Spain and Poland). Figure 2 also shows European regional differences. In Northern and Western European countries, the majority of the people asked were in favour of the scheme (with AT and NL as the only exceptions), but in Eastern and Southern European countries support levels were notably higher, with a peak of 91% in Portugal. Exceptions here were the Czech Republic and Estonia, the support

[2] We computed the linear predictor for $\hat{Y}ij$ and used its observed variance. The observed variance is divided by the total variance (the sum of the variance of the linear predictor, the variance of the random intercept and the fixed value of the level-one residual variance ($\pi 2/3$)).

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Table 1. Multilevel logistic regression models: dependent variable: support for EU minimum-income scheme.

	Model 1.0		Model 1.1		Model 1.2		Model 1.3	
Standardised individual level variables	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE
Expectations of the EU (hope or fear)			0.380***	0.016			0.374***	0.016
Evaluation of standard of living as unemployed					–0.172***	0.016	–0.165***	0.016
Subjective income			–0.061***	0.017	–0.041*	0.016	–0.047**	0.017
Education			–0.074***	0.016	–0.112***	0.015	–0.082***	0.016
Work status (ref. paid work)								
In education			0.134*	0.060	0.117*	0.058	0.120*	0.060
Unemployed			0.258***	0.067	0.241***	0.065	0.229**	0.068
Disabled			0.013	0.084	0.110	0.082	0.119	0.085
Retired			0.013	0.048	0.025	0.046	0.010	0.048
Other			0.092*	0.044	0.076	0.043	0.086	0.044
Left–right self-placement			–0.221***	0.015	–0.203***	0.015	–0.209***	0.015
Egalitarian			0.293***	0.014	0.289***	0.014	0.279***	0.015
Feel attached to EU			0.219***	0.015	0.248***	0.015	0.233***	0.016
Age			–0.028	0.024	–0.069**	0.022	–0.041	0.024
Gender (ref. is male)			0.016	0.014	0.016	0.014	0.017	0.014
Intercept	0.851***	0.178	0.837***	0.148	0.832***	0.160	0.848***	0.140
N	18		18		18		18	
Groups	32,587		26,540		27,844		26,225	
Variance random intercept	0.570		0.384		0.450		0.337	
Variance linear predictor			0.407		0.280		0.457	
Explained variance (%)			9.97		6.97		11.19	

Note: Significance levels ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05.

levels of which were closer to that of Western European countries.

Regarding hope or fear about the effects of EU decision-making on the quality of social benefits and services in one's country, Figure 2 clearly shows higher levels of 'hope' in Southern and Eastern European countries that social protection will improve, especially in Latvia, Poland, Portugal and Estonia, than in Western and Northern European countries. In the former regions, 'hope'-levels were between about 40 and 70%, while in the Northern and Western European this was only between 10 and 20% (with the UK's 31% being an exception, which might imply that some Britons hope to catch up with the more generous welfare states on the European continent).

Lastly, Figure 2 shows that people in Eastern and Southern European countries were much more critical about the performance of their welfare state in providing a decent standard of living for the unemployed (with the CZ as an exception), while Western Europeans were more positive or moderate in their critique.

Multivariate analyses

Individual-level effects Next, we present our multivariate analyses. In Table 1, we present the multilevel logistic regression models. Model 1.0 is the null model, including only a random intercept. The intra-class correlation (ICC) was .148, which suggests that about 15% of the variation in the outcome variable could be attributed to differences at the country level. In Model 1.1, we added the individual-level control variables as well as the hope-or-fear variable (expectations). This hope-or-fear variable showed a relatively strong positive effect, compared with the other individual-level indicators. In addition, we found that people with a lower subjective income and lower education, and people who were unemployed were stronger supporters of an EU-wide minimum-income scheme. And, as expected, people who had stronger egalitarian values, defined themselves as politically left-wing and felt attached to the EU were also more in favour of an EU social benefit. This confirms the results of Baute and Meuleman (2020). Model 1.2 adds the effect of the evaluation of the standard of living of the unemployed. As expected, following the hope-or-fear reasoning, the more negative people perceived the standard of living of the unemployed in their country, the greater was the support for an EU minimum-income scheme. This model tested the total effect of the dependent variable. In Model 1.3, both factors were included to show the direct effect, controlling for the possible mediator 'expectations of EU social policy'. This model provided only a first indication, as the test of the KHB model for the full mediation analysis is shown below. The percentage explained variance of Model 1.1 (9.97%) and Model 1.2 (6.97%) showed that expectations of EU social policy explained more variation in an EU minimum-income scheme support than did the evaluation of the welfare state performance.

In Table 2, we show the relationship between performance evaluations of the welfare state and the hope-or-fear expectations regarding the EU. Model 2.0 was

the null model, including only a random intercept. The intra-class correlation (ICC) is .221, which was substantially high, and suggests that 22% of the variation in individual-level expectations were related to differences between countries. Another indication for this was found in Model 2.1, where the individual-level variables were added. There was a significant effect of performance evaluation on the expectation attitude, but the effect size was small. Also the other individual-level indicators showed only small effect sizes and contributed very little to the explained variance. Lower educated people, egalitarians and people who feel attached to the EU were found to be more hopeful towards EU social policy. Remarkable is the relatively strong effect of age (compared with the insignificant effect of age on support for EU social benefit). It appears that younger people have higher expectations of EU social policy than do older people. This can be interpreted as encouraging for the future of EU social policy-making in case it is a cohort effect, but less so if it is an age effect.

Table 2. Multilevel linear regression models – dependent variable: expectations of the EU (hope or fear).

	Model 2.0		Model 2.1	
	Coeff	SE	Coeff	SE
Evaluation standard of living as unemployed			–0.035***	0.006
Subjective income			–0.009	0.006
Education			–0.057***	0.006
Work status (ref. paid work)				
In education			0.018	0.022
Unemployed			0.030	0.024
Disabled			0.025	0.031
Retired			0.040*	0.018
Other			0.010	0.016
Left–right self-placement			–0.003	0.006
Egalitarian			0.041***	0.006
Feel attached to EU			0.081***	0.006
Age			–0.054***	0.009
Gender (ref. is male)			–0.004	0.005
Intercept	0.031	0.111	0.022	0.108
N	31,764		27,284	
Groups	18		18	
Variance group	0.221		0.207	
Variance residuals	0.781		0.765	
Explained variance group (%)			6.33	
Explained variance residuals (%)			2.05	

Note: Significance levels ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05.

Contextual-level effects In Table 3, contextual-level variables were tested separately in different models. All models were controlled for all individual-level variables. As for support for an EU minimum-income scheme, we see that all our three contextual level indicators were associated with such support. A higher unemployment rate (Model 1.4) and lower wealth (GDP per capita) (Model 1.5) in a country related to higher support for an EU minimum-income scheme. This confirms that economic conditions in a country (possibly via affecting problem awareness and fear for welfare retrenchment) are important conditions in what people expect from the EU (Burgoon, 2009), which is an assumption underlying the hope-or-fear reasoning. Additionally, a 'national interest' factor seems to play a role as well, since in countries that are net-receivers of the EU, support was found to be higher (Model 1.6). We assume that this effect works via the mechanisms that people in these countries have positive, personal experience with EU involvement improving conditions in their country. All context variables had comparable levels of explained variance.

Table 3. Contextual effects on support for EU minimum-income scheme and expectations (hope or fear).

		Support for EU minimum-income scheme					
Model	Context variables (centred)	Coeff	SE	Variance intercept	Variance linear predictor	Explained variance	*N* group
M1.4	Unemployment rate	0.087**	0.029	0.221	0.658	15.78	18
M1.5	Operating budgetary balance	0.158*	0.063	0.248	0.638	15.28	18
M1.6	GDP per capita in ppp * 1,000	–0.236*	0.000	0.273	0.639	15.21	18
		Expectation (hope or fear)					
		Coef	SE	Variance group	Variance residuals	Explained variance country level	*N* group
M2.2	Unemployment rate	0.020	0.027	0.201	0.765	9.05	18
M2.3	Operating budgetary balance	0.187***	0.036	0.082	0.765	62.90	18
M2.4	GDP per capita in ppp * 1,000	–0.331***	0.061	0.079	0.765	64.25	18
M2.5	Operating budgetary balance	0.106*	0.044	0.060	0.765	72.85	18
	GDP per capita in ppp * 1,000	–0.198*	0.077				

Note: Models are controlled for all individual level variables. Significance levels ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05.

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Table 4. Mediation effect – KHB method.

	Coefficient	SE
Reduced model (total effect)	–0.176***	0.016
Full model (direct effect)	–0.163***	0.016
Difference (indirect effect)	–0.013***	0.002
Confounding ratio	1.08	
Confounding percentage	7.52	

Note: Model type: logistic regression, fixed effects model. Dependent variable: Support for EU minimum-income scheme. Mediating variable: Expectations of the EU. Independent variable: Evaluation standard of living unemployed. Controlled for individual level variables and country dummies. *N*: 26,225. Significance levels ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05.

With regard to the expectations in the EU, the unemployment rate did not have a significant effect (Model 2.2). However, both operating budgetary balance (Model 2.3) and GDP per capita (Model 2.4) showed strong significant effects and explained a large share of the country level variation. Model 2.5 shows that both indicators showed significant effects also in the event they were both added to the model. The explained variance at the country level increased to almost 73%. This confirms that differences in expectations of the EU are not so much related to individual differences between social groups, but instead are strongly determined by the characteristics of the country. In poorer countries that on net balance receive money from the EU, hopes are higher that the EU policy-making would also positively influence their country's social policies. Again, this is in line with the hope-or-fear reasoning that expects that regional differences in expectations of the EU are partly determined by the economic circumstances and the (financially) positive influence of EU policies in a country.

Mediation effect: hope-or-fear reasoning In this final step, we performed the KHB analysis to test the total, direct and indirect effect of our variables measuring the hope-or-fear reasoning. For this analysis, we specified the dependent variable *support for an EU minimum-income scheme*, the explanatory variable *evaluation of welfare performance*, and the mediator variable *expectation of the EU*. Also, all individual-level control variables, as well as dummies for the countries, were added as concomitant variables. The KHB analysis provided us with the estimated effect for the reduced model (the total effect), the full model (the direct effect, controlled for the mediating variable) and the estimated difference between the models (the indirect effect).

Table 4 shows that the estimated effect of *evaluation of welfare performance* in the reduced model was −0.176 and significant. The direct effect, taking into account the mediating variable *expectation of the EU*, was −0.163 and significant and the estimated difference, the indirect effect of the mediating variable *expectation of the EU,* was therefore only −0.013. The confounding ratio shows that the total effect was 1.08 times larger than the direct effect, and the confounding percentage indicates that only 7.5% of the total effect could be attributed to the mediating variable, *expectations of the EU*. We conclude that, although the indirect effect was significant, it was not substantial. Only a very small proportion of the effect of the evaluation of welfare performance on support for an EU minimum-income scheme was mediated by expectations of the EU. Thus, despite the fact that *expectations of the EU* have a strong independent effect on *support for an EU minimum-income scheme*, no substantial mediation effect was found. This leads us to conclude that the expectation that the hope-or-fear reasoning could explain support for an EU minimum-income scheme must be rejected.

Conclusions

Knowledge about expectations regarding the EU social policy domain as they are prevailing among populations of different European countries, and among different social categories within countries, would importantly contribute to our understanding of the feasibility of developing the social domain further at the European level. In this study, we examined to what extend Europeans support introducing an EU social benefit scheme that guarantees a minimum income level for the poor. Previous studies suggested that this support would be determined by a hope-or-fear reasoning. That is, as we know that especially citizens in Eastern and Southern European countries are very critical about the performance of their welfare state, expectations were that this would lead to higher hopes that EU involvement in social policies would increase levels of social protection by means of social benefits and services and, therefore, to stronger support for an EU minimum-income scheme. For Northern and Western Europeans, this would work differently; a relatively positive evaluation of their countries' welfare provisions would be expected to lead to the fear that EU interference would worsen social benefits and services and, therefore, lower support for an EU minimum-income scheme.

We found that, at the time of the study, European people's support for a minimum income level for poor Europeans was very high overall; two-thirds of Europeans were in favour. Support levels were especially high not only in Eastern and Southern European countries, but also in the Northern and Western regions of Europe, people showed high levels of

support for it. Support was found to be related to individual- and contextual-level characteristics. People in worse socio-economic situations and people who are more egalitarian and pro-EU showed higher levels of support for an EU minimum-income scheme (see also Baute & Meuleman, 2020). In countries with lower wealth and higher unemployment levels, support was higher, as well as in countries that were net receivers of the EU. Individual expectations of the EU were found to be strongly determined by contextual-level factors and, rather surprisingly, not very much by individual factors. We found that in countries that are less wealthy, have a positive budgetary balance and are thus net receivers of the EU, people have more hope that the EU level decision-making would improve benefit levels in their country. These results can be interpreted as an expression of the expected dividing lines between Northern/Western and Eastern/Southern European countries in the hope-or-fear reasoning. The support for an EU minimum-income scheme is partly explained by these expectations, but in addition also by social dividing lines within the populations in different countries.

However, our main theoretical expectation, the hope-or-fear reasoning, was rejected. Expectations of the effects of EU level decision-making (hope-or-fear) did not substantially mediate the relationship between critical performance evaluations and support for an EU minimum-income scheme. Clearly, performance evaluations and expectations of the EU have separate and independent effects on support for an EU minimum-income scheme, both in expected directions (lower performance evaluations and higher expectations leading to more support). The question remains as to what types of reasonings, if not hope-or-fear, lead people to support the EU social policy domain. Based on the individual-level effects in our model, ideological and political ideas seem more relevant, compared with people's socio-structural positions, as well as feeling attached to the EU. These factors, as well as other reasons and reasonings, should be studied in more detail, while also theoretical expectations should be developed.

What implications do our findings have for discussions about the (future) integration of the EU in the field of social policy? Of course, more attitude studies should be carried out, measuring support for a range of types of possible European social policies, with also a view on possible conditions that people would connect to being in favour or against such policies, to get a more complete view of reasonings about Social Europe and reasons for supporting further European integration in the social domain. But in our view, the fact that about two-thirds of Europeans would be in favour of an EU minimum-income scheme for the poor is rather striking and may fuel dreams of the viability of transnational solidarity within Europe. Clearly, enthusiasm for an EU minimum-income scheme for the poor is higher in the Southern and Eastern regions of Europe. Here, people are more critical about the performance of their own welfare state, more people expect positive effects of EU-level decision-making on their social protection levels and countries in these regions are more of net-receivers from the EU than net-payers. But again, in most countries in the Western and Northern regions of Europe, more than half of their populations were also found to be in favour of an EU social benefit, although here people are less critical, have lower expectations from the EU and although these countries are net-payers.

Although Baute et al. (2018) regarded an EU minimum-income scheme as the 'most intrusive' type of EU social policy, given its direct impact on people's life, support was found to be substantially high, especially when considering that such a scheme challenges the boundaries and decision-making power of the national welfare states to a great extent. A possible explanation might be that support for the EU social policy domain is higher when it focuses directly on the specific goal of alleviating poverty among Europeans, instead of involving more abstract discussions about citizenship rights or member state solidarity between nation states. Future research should look into support for different EU social policies in more detail.

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Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics of the central variables.

	Support for EU minimum-income scheme (0–1 scale)		Expectation EU benefit scheme (hope or fear) (1–5 scale)				Evaluation standard of living unemployed (0–10 scale)			
Country	% (str) against	% (str) in favour	% fear (1–2)	% hope (4–5)	Mean	SD	% <5	% >5	Mean	SD
Total	33.33	66.67	36.84	30.07	2.927	.937	60.19	20.26	3.940	2.053
North										
FI	49.33	50.67	64.51	7.99	2.360	.737	55.63	26.16	4.345	1.775
SE	46.15	53.85	61.87	8.06	2.369	.795	51.91	22.00	4.380	1.674
West										
AT	51.99	48.01	62.35	12.13	2.350	.959	32.49	45.29	5.431	2.074
BE	32.72	67.28	51.02	14.61	2.600	.798	32.63	40.38	5.160	1.737
DE	38.84	61.16	50.57	17.07	2.648	.826	51.42	26.06	4.491	1.861
FR	40.99	59.01	49.86	16.84	2.604	.875	53.47	20.53	4.318	1.828
GB	48.82	51.18	32.60	31.36	3.002	.891	49.13	29.90	4.606	1.939
IE	32.46	67.54	56.99	21.60	2.565	.955	41.19	38.76	4.873	2.055
NL	50.54	49.46	61.67	13.31	2.474	.796	34.11	40.62	5.076	1.548
East										
CZ	40.27	59.73	23.93	46.09	3.309	1.063	49.87	29.06	4.422	2.158
EE	33.61	66.39	13.22	54.03	3.461	.817	73.82	9.42	3.214	1.837
HU	19.13	80.87	20.67	47.40	3.294	.951	74.36	10.14	3.232	1.870
LT	15.57	84.43	5.18	67.43	3.806	.820	64.97	17.71	3.572	2.204
PL	21.51	78.49	11.23	56.82	3.541	.836	75.46	9.70	3.195	1.912
SI	13.80	86.20	13.34	49.69	3.386	.764	77.40	9.96	3.029	1.992
South										
ES	13.62	86.38	21.83	51.64	3.322	.904	80.32	5.26	2.911	1.754
IT	16.95	83.05	18.46	36.98	3.204	.846	80.36	7.82	2.700	1.967
PT	8.91	91.09	11.23	56.82	3.262	.887	79.66	6.17	2.823	1.930

Note: Design and population size weights are applied.

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